

A Long Awaited Trip to Bali

Sara Goodman

In 1972, when I was 16 years old, a friend of my brother's came to stay with us who had been traveling around Indonesia collecting textiles. I was fascinated by his tales of visiting ikat weavers, an ancient craft that was fast disappearing as young people went in search of jobs with dreams of owning a motorcycle. Soon there would be no one left to pass on these weaving techniques to. Something clicked then in my young mind. I vowed that I would learn more about weaving, and ikat, and someday, I would travel to Bali, to see it for myself.

In June of 2005, 33 years later, my husband, our 11 year-old son, and I arrived in Denpasar, Bali. In the WARP newsletter I had read about Jean Howe, William Ingram and Threads of Life in Ubud, the artistic and cultural center of Bali. Before our trip I read William's book, *A Little Bit One O'clock*. In it I learned all about Darta, and his extended family. Jean arranged a homestay for the three of us at Darta's family compound. She also set up back strap weaving lessons for me with a woman named Komang, and some visits to weavers around Bali.

When we exited the airport, Rudi, Darta's youngest brother, was there to meet us and drive us up to Ubud. As we zipped through the dense evening traffic, more crowded with motorcycles than cars, I kept wondering... Am I too late? Is the Bali I have longed to see all my life gone? Passing a large Dunkin' Donuts, not far from the airport, was not reassuring.

The narrow highway, a two-lane road, that is used like a four lane road with cars and motorbikes passing each other simultaneously in both directions, was jammed on both sides with cast concrete Hindu statuary and wooden furniture shops. On the edge of the busy road children on bikes rumbled along. Chickens, dogs and pedestrians carrying bundles on their heads, threaded their way through the crowds. The ride was both exhilarating and terrifying. When we finally arrived, Darta, Suti (Darta's wife), Jean and William were all there to greet us. The quiet and calm of that family courtyard was a welcome oasis after our days of traveling. That night, we slept to the sound of gamelan music and woke to roosters crowing.

We had breakfast with Darta, in the terrace restaurant, overlooking the rooftops of the town. We ate fried bread filled with banana and coconut and drank ginger tea. While we ate Darta talked to us about the values that hold Balinese life together: everything in harmony, keeping the whole community in balance, having just enough of what you need, maintaining the human and natural environment.

After breakfast we slipped out of the compound and walked up a twisting dirt track to the rice fields. It was truly magical. There were terraced rice paddies for as far as we could see. Ducks waddled in lines, along the maze of irrigation ditches, and then plopped into the muddy water and swam. Cows were tethered to small bamboo lean-tos. Everywhere there were smiling Balinese rice farmers tending the rice crops that were in all stages of growth. It was intensely green. Everywhere there were offerings of

flowers, incense and rice on little woven palm leaf plates. We walked on, until we got to the edge of the forest, and turned around.

We arrived back at Ruma Roda just as the Threads of Life Gallery, a for profit Indonesian run business, was opening. The gallery is nestled under the restaurant, and is luxuriously air-conditioned. I admit, a welcome cool spot after our sweaty walk. It consists of two rooms, filled with a beautiful variety of handmade textiles from all over Indonesia, displayed with biographies of the craftspeople.

Later that morning we went to a lecture Jean was giving on Indonesian textiles, upstairs in the restaurant, for two other tourists. She took us on a textile tour of Indonesia, showing fabric from many different islands: Flores, West Timor, Sulawesi, Lembata, and Bali. We learned that textiles serve four main functions: 1. to be worn as sarongs 2. as a marriage exchange between clans as part of the bridewealth 3. for wrapping the dead during funerals 4. for fertility ceremonies during planting and harvesting.

As Jean described the work of the Indonesian Foundation* Yayasan Pecinta Budaya Bebali, a separate non-profit entity from the gallery, which supports the development aspects of their work, I relaxed and smiled. Here was someone successfully working against the disappearance of traditional textile production. As the staff traveled from island to island, encouraging weavers to go back in their trunks and find the fabrics their grandmothers made, and copy those ancient motifs, they were reviving the nearly lost traditions of spinning, dyeing, and weaving that had so inspired me as a teenager. Then the fabric was brought to Ubud to be sold in the gallery. Threads of Life was making it possible for weavers throughout Indonesia, to make a good living creating museum quality textiles, based on the textile traditions of their ancestors.

The next day, we went off on a day trip with Rudi and Weti (one of the staff from Threads of Life), to visit some weavers and dyers in different villages around Bali. First we went to a small factory in the town of Gianyar where we saw women tying cotton wefts with plastic ikat tape, in preparation for dyeing. We also saw women weaving the fabric on two shaft floor looms. Next we went to a more remote village called Sideman where they do a supplementary weft technique called Songket on back strap looms. I was amazed to see a 16 year-old girl manipulating 20 different slim bamboo rods with string heddles to create the various sheds. All this was done from memory, nothing was written down. Finally we visited the thriving workshop of a man named Pok Cok, who employed 48 people making natural dyed batik cloth. My only regret from that day is that we couldn't visit the town of Tenganan, because the town was closed for a funeral ceremony. It is the only place in Bali where they do compound (warp & weft) ikat.

I intend to maintain my connection with Jean and William and Threads of Life, doing whatever I can to support the good work they are doing to strengthen the textile arts in Indonesia. I think of myself as a textile tourist. I am certainly not an anthropologist. Yet I saw with my own eyes that as North Americans, we can have a positive effect on helping to preserve traditional culture and the knowledge and craft of

textile production. Threads of Life is effective because it nurtures leadership in local people, encourages them to produce work using the methods of their grandmothers, copying the fabrics and motifs on the pieces in their family collections, and encourages the use of natural dyes and handspun cotton whenever possible. Traditional Balinese village life still exists in most areas away from the big towns. In Indonesia people still wear the traditional sarong every day and textiles continue to be filled with spiritual meanings.

Many thanks to the WARP newsletter, which made it so easy for me to find such good friends on the other side of the world.

* The Threads of Life Foundation, is a third component, based in the US, which allows tax-deductible funds to be funneled to the Indonesian Foundation.

Sara Goodman can be reached at 603/795-4339 (phone), or at sara.goodman@valley.net (email).